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SHO-I VERSUS KING II - VICTORY AT LEYTE GULF - WAS  
IT UNITED STATES LUCK OR JAPANESE MISTAKES?

BY

COMMANDER CHARLES D. CROWELL

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The Battle for Leyte Gulf was the greatest naval battle of all time in terms of number of ships involved, losses of ships and aircraft and size of area over which battle was fought. The American victory effectively marked the end of the Japanese Navy in World War Two. The battle was marked by furious surface, air and submarine action at sea and fierce fighting ashore on Leyte Island by US Army and Marine ground forces. While U.S. Navy dealt devastating losses to the Japanese fleet and claimed a resounding victory, the battle continues to be discussed in service schools for the significant operational, tactical and judgmental errors made by commanders of both sides. This study examines the errors made, the reasons for the errors and the effect the errors had toward deciding the outcome of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. It investigates the Japanese plan for the battle and the Japanese philosophy toward the war in 1944 and how these issues affected the outcome. It also considers the American chain of command in the Pacific theater and the problems caused by that unique set-up. The paper discusses what we have learned, if anything from Leyte Gulf, and if in a similar situation would we make the same mistakes again. Finally the paper evaluates the composite effect of errors on both sides and attempts to answer the question posed in the title.

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**SHO-I VERSUS KING II - VICTORY AT LEYTE GULF - WAS IT UNITED STATES LUCK OR JAPANESE MISTAKES ?**

**AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT**

**by**

**Commander Charles D. Crowell, USN**

**Prof. M.J. Luvaas  
Project Advisor**

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**U.S. Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013  
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# ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Charles D. Crowell, CDR, USN

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# SHO-I VERSUS KING II - VICTORY AT LEYTE GULF WAS IT UNITED STATES LUCK OR JAPANESE MISTAKES ?

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Discussions surrounding the Battle of Leyte Gulf have been conducted in Navy wardrooms, fleet headquarters and officers clubs since Admiral William F. Halsey declared the Japanese Navy beaten, routed and broken on 25 October 1944. While the Leyte Gulf victory was not as decisive a battle as Midway, which cost the Japanese four fleet carriers and associated air wings, the U.S. victory gave the Allies freedom of the seas in the Pacific Ocean until the end of the war.

In naval warfare, according to an old Navy handbook, Sound Military Decision, "Mistakes are normal, errors are usual; information is seldom complete, often inaccurate and frequently misleading."<sup>1</sup> The battle was marked by mistakes on both sides, at all levels of command, from operations plans to force dispositions and ammunition loading of ships. Enough judgmental, tactical and logistical errors were made for either side to have lost the battle. The question is did the U.S. Navy win at Leyte Gulf because it was superior or because it made fewer mistakes than the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters and the Japanese fleet. This paper will focus on the mistakes of both forces, from top to bottom. The tactical level of the four



major surface actions have been written about many times, so individual ship actions will not be rehashed in this short paper. I will concentrate instead on plans, personalities, equipment and related results of the sea battle associated with the landing of American forces on Leyte Island on 20 October 1944.

### BACKGROUND

The Battle for Leyte Gulf marked the beginning of the end of the United States Army, Army Air Corps, Navy and Marine Corps advance across the Pacific Ocean to defeat the Imperial Japanese forces. After recovering from the damage the U.S. fleet sustained at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, American forces started a chain of victories culminated by smashing the Japanese surface fleet in the seas surrounding the Philippine Archipelago in October 1944. The naval victory came after successful amphibious landings were conducted on Leyte Island by Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's U.S. Sixth Army.

On 20 May 1942 control of the Philippine Islands was abdicated to Japanese forces when U.S. Army troops surrendered on Luzon. Two and one-half years later the U.S. Navy commenced bombardment of Leyte Island in the first phase of U.S. efforts to recapture the Philippines. Leyte Island was chosen as the assault point because of its central location within the Archipelago. Success would divide the Japanese forces in the

Islands, provide a suburb anchorage for naval forces and landing fields for air forces and establish an excellent point for continuing operations against the rest of the Philippines, Formosa, and even Japan itself.

In 1942 United States strategy for the Pacific war was a holding plan to prevent further advance of the Japanese throughout the Pacific and to maintain open lines of communication to Australia. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were responsible for fighting the Pacific Theater, subject to decisions of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs were General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff, United States Army; Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, and Chief of Naval Operations; General Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General, Army Air Forces; and Admiral William D. Leahy, Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>2</sup>

The Pacific Theater was a divided command area: the Southwest Pacific, had General Douglas MacArthur as Supreme Commander and the Pacific Ocean Area, encompassing the North and Central Pacific areas, where Admiral Chester W. Nimitz was Commander-in-Chief. The two commands were considered mutually supporting and the staffs coordinated joint operations while fighting to regain Pacific territory from the Japanese. This divided command relationship would be a conflicting issue during the Leyte Gulf campaign later in 1944.

As the U.S. forces began putting together victories in 1942 and 1943 the J.C.S. approved the Strategic Plan for the

Defeat of Japan, the objective of which was to force the unconditional surrender of the Japanese. Because this plan might possibly require an invasion of the Japanese Islands, establishing a base for supporting air attacks against Japan was necessary. The plan to secure a proper base of operations for this phase was widely debated before resolution was reached. Initially the J.C.S. envisioned China as the ideal location to base aircraft for bombing Japan, however in March 1944 the Marianas Islands were substituted for China by the J.C.S. The victory plan called for acquiring island bases to use as steppingstones to shorten the sea route, provide security and deny the Japanese access to specific areas, while allowing for U.S. advance and the establishment of secure staging locations as the combined forces advanced across the Pacific. Although this plan required mutual support between General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz, the Pacific Commander-in-Chiefs and the service chiefs in Washington could not reach agreement on where to establish sites for attacking the Japanese Islands.

General MacArthur was adamant regarding the Philippines, feeling the United States owed the Filipinos freedom from the Japanese subjugation they had suffered since early in the war. He also wanted to avenge the costly and humiliating U.S. defeat by the Japanese, and make good on his promise to return to the Philippines, a promise he had made to the Filipino people upon his arrival in Australia in April 1942. The Navy, particularly

Admiral King, felt the Philippines could be bypassed using a two-phased approach to Japan. One phase would use the Bonin Island chain as staging points for bombers and the second phase would capture Formosa and use bases in China for staging and conducting bombing missions on Japan. General MacArthur would invade Mindanao and support the Navy to the north. The Navy felt its plan would bottle up the Japanese by cutting off the South China Sea lanes and thereby shorten the war.

By June 1944 continued U.S. successes against increasingly weaker Japanese resistance induced the J.C.S. to propose to the Pacific commanders that the timetable for operations be speeded up. The J.C.S. asked both commanders to submit plans that would quicken the Pacific advance. MacArthur's strong opinion regarding bypassing the Philippines was well known. He firmly stated that without the Philippines there would be no support base for attacking Formosa, and that the logistic lines, already stretched to the maximum, would not support bypassing Luzon. He submitted "Reno V", a plan proposing several invasion points in the Philippines with a final advance into Manila, supported by Nimitz's Pacific Fleet, by April 1945. MacArthur's plan and message to the J.C.S. brought critical replies from General Marshall, who stated MacArthur should not let personal feelings and political considerations override the main objectives, and Admiral King, who called it the General's "desires and visions" rather than a practical plan for the defeat of Japan. Admirals King and Nimitz submitted "Granite

II", a continuation of the Formosa and Chinese mainland plan.<sup>3</sup>

The final decision was resolved by President Roosevelt in late July 1944, while on a military inspection tour in Hawaii. At a meeting between President Roosevelt, MacArthur, Nimitz and Leahy, both cases were presented. After extensive discussion and debate, during which MacArthur again made his case for the Filipino people, agreement was reached on the major strategy points. The Philippines would not be bypassed and both commanders agreed that the plan could be conducted with the forces presently under both commands. While the decision ultimately had to be approved by the J.C.S. the groundwork for returning to the Philippines was set. Timetables began to be firmed and logistics for the advance arranged and positioned. MacArthur would return to the Philippines as promised.

The Japanese Imperial General Headquarters knew that U.S. forces would be attacking the Philippines in strength. The question they had to answer was where and when the landing would take place ?

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XII, p. 337.
2. M. Hamlin Cannon, Leyte: The Return to the Philippines, p. 1.
3. Morison, pp. 5 - 7.

## CHAPTER II

### SHO I - Defense of the Philippines

#### Japanese Preliminary Events Leading to SHO-GO

The Japanese Navy's October 1944 attempt to defeat American forces landing at Leyte Gulf led to the final complete sea battle of the Pacific theater. It was certainly a decisive battle, although not the type the Japanese had planned during the two years since their defeat at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. The naval engagements at Leyte marked the end of the Japanese Navy as an effective fighting force. The battle, from the time the various fleet elements sortied until the Japanese retired in defeat, covered a period of six days and involved surface, air, and subsurface actions in four separate seas surrounding the Philippine Islands.

The Japanese strategy in mid-1944 was to sustain the war effort and hope the Americans would grow tired of the fighting. For this strategy to succeed, it was imperative that control of the Philippines and the attending sea lines of communication to the East Indies remained open. The Japanese were not surprised, nor unprepared, by the American invasion of the Philippines. Their only uncertainty, other than the date, was which island would be the assault point. Imperial General Headquarters had

no question about the strategic value of the Philippine Islands as the key factor enabling the Japanese to continue the war. Japan was completely dependent on raw materials from the Indies, including oil, rubber and metal ores for the manufacture of war products. Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Soemu Toyoda, stated,

Should we lose in the Philippines operations, even though the fleet would be left, the shipping lane to the south would be completely cut off so that the fleet, if it should come back to Japanese waters, could not obtain its fuel supply. If it should remain in southern waters, it could not receive supplies of arms and ammunition. There would be no sense in saving the fleet at the expense of the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

#### Japanese Naval and Air Force Organization

The Japanese fleet organization was modified after the First Battle of the Philippine Sea defeat in June 1944. The losses of three (two fleet and one light) aircraft carriers and 400 aircraft necessitated reorganization before the fleet could go into battle as a unit. The Japanese Navy was commanded by Admiral Toyoda, headquartered in Tokyo. The fleet was organized into the Mobile Force, commanded by Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa, consisting of two separate components. The Main Body, including the remaining Japanese aircraft carriers and support ships had Ozawa as commander, and the First Striking Force, containing the major combatant surface ships of the fleet, commanded by Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita. The composition of these forces will be discussed in a later chapter.

The bases of operations for the two forces were as diverse as their configuration. In 1944 as U.S. combined forces advanced westward the Japanese fleet continued to withdraw to the east to avoid air attacks from U.S. carrier and land based planes. Fleet anchorages and support bases were moved from Truk in the Central Carolines, to Palau in the Western Carolines, to Davao on Mindanao and finally to Lingga near Singapore. During the late summer Kurita's force operated from Lingga Anchorage, near Japan's remaining source of fuel supplies, while conducting training in surface tactics and antiaircraft defense. The carrier task force remained within the Inland Sea, close to Japanese shipyards, to repair battle damage and train new pilots and air crews. Japanese intelligence estimated that the American assault would not occur before the first of November, giving the fleet time for repair and refit, add radar units, crew training and carrier deck qualification. The plan was to join the two forces together for operations against the predicted American offensive.

Japanese air forces were supposed to play a major part in the offensive and defensive phases of the SHO-I plan. The set-up of these forces should be discussed for the significant role they played in the Battle for Leyte Gulf. The Navy had Base Air Forces, land-based air groups designated to cover certain areas, and the Army had Air Armies, which sometimes came under joint command from the Navy. During the Leyte operation two Air Forces played a major role. The Sixth Base Air Force, commanded



by Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukudome, was responsible for Kyushu, the Ryukyus and Formosa. The Sixth had about 750 aircraft of which 225 were fighters. The Fifth Base Air Force, commanded by Vice Admiral Kimpei Teraoka and Fourth Air Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Kyoji Tominaga, covered the Philippines. These air groups took a heavy beating from Admiral Halsey's TF 38 planes during the raids on Luzon, Formosa and Okinawa in September. By the time the defense of the Philippines began, the combined forces numbered 440 aircraft, including 198 fighters.<sup>2</sup>

Submarines constituted the final element of the Japanese defense plan. The sixteen submarines, designated the Advance Expeditionary Forces, were to be used to counter the U.S. invasion fleet. The battle orders for the submarines were to intercept the enemy and gain control of the invasion area by attacking aircraft carriers, battleships and troop convoys. Although they were positioned along the SHO defensive line and despite the significant number of large targets available in the area, the Japanese submarines were never a factor in the battle. During the fighting around the Philippines they only sank one U.S. destroyer. Had the submarines used aggressive tactics against the capital ships in the Philippine Sea the survivability of the Japanese surface ships enroute Leyte Gulf would have been significantly improved.

### The Japanese Battle Plan

The official Japanese name for this operation was "SHO-GO", which means victory operation. Imperial General Headquarters correctly guessed that the two prongs of the American offensive, from the Central and Southwest Pacific, would converge on the Philippines. While the I.G.H. had not yet determined the exact method of deployment for the fleet, a defensive line was drawn from the main islands, through Formosa to the Philippines. The premise that this line would receive the full support of the fleet's offensive and defensive capability was the basis for SHO-GO.

The purpose of SHO-GO, conceived in early fall 1944 when the Japanese Empire was being forced inward on all sides, was to defend the Japanese home islands and the strategic adjacent areas. The plan divided Japan and the surrounding area into four SHO zones: SHO 1, the Philippines; SHO 2, Formosa and the Ryukyus (Taiwan and the chain of small islands between it and the main Japanese Islands); SHO 3, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku (the three southernmost Japanese Islands); and SHO 4, Hokkaido and the Kuriles (the northernmost Japanese island and the strategic chain of small islands that runs northward toward the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands). Of all four of the possibilities, the attack on the Philippines was the most probable.

SHO 1 was designed to counter any American attempt to

invade the Philippine Islands. The four parts of SHO 1 are summarized as follows:

1. Land based naval air forces planned to meet the assault forces at least 700 miles east of the Philippines. The objective was to reduce U.S. strength by bombing and torpedo attacks on the American fleet. The Army Air Force, coordinating with naval air, planned to destroy the remaining forces at the amphibious assault point.

2. The First Striking Force would sortie from Brunei Bay in Borneo to intercept the U.S. convoys and support ships and conduct surface engagements.

3. Upon commencement of amphibious landings, the First Striking Force would attack at the invasion point to destroy the landing forces.

4. The Main Body stationed in the Inland Sea would be used as a diversion to lure the U.S. carrier task force toward the north away from the expected landing area, allowing the Striking Force to destroy the landing forces.

Task 1 was assigned to the Japanese Fifth Base Air Force in the Philippines and the Sixth Base Air Force from Formosa. Tasks 2 and 3 were assigned to the First Strike Force and Task 4 was assigned to Vice Admiral Ozawa, commander of the Main Body, all the Japanese aircraft carriers that remained at this point of the war.<sup>3</sup>

As the battle for the Philippines approached, Admiral Nobumasa Suetsugu said:

It was to be regarded not as a mere battle for the Philippines but one which will decide whether Japan can maintain or is to be cut off from her communications with the vital resources to the southern regions. The outcome of the Philippine operations will be of such far-reaching nature as to decide the general war situation, and I am certain it will be the greatest and most decisive battle fought. He also predicted, When the right moment came, Japanese forces would deal the final smashing blow to the enemy.\*

Although the Japanese were preparing for a "general decisive battle", a term used frequently in their reports and after action summaries, they were mainly concerned with holding Luzon. This was a critical mistake that would pave the way for tactical and operational errors by both the Japanese Army and Navy that compounded the problems for defending the islands. The I.G.H. fully understood that the Combined Fleet faced the possibility of a devastating defeat by the American fleet with possible losses of over fifty percent. Errors in judgement began to mount at this point, even before the landings had begun at Leyte Gulf.

Japanese propaganda played a major role in the decision to commit the fleet in desperation. From 11 to 16 October Admiral Halsey's Task Force 38 conducted massive air attacks on Formosa and Luzon to obtain intelligence information on enemy strength and also to destroy Japanese forces prior to the amphibious landings. During these attacks, the Japanese countered with over 1000 sorties against TF 38. Despite losses of 700 planes,

the Japanese people were told that the Imperial Japanese Navy had destroyed sixty percent of America's effective naval strength, sunk over 500,000 tons and sent 26,000 American seamen to their deaths. Halsey's Third Fleet had ceased to be an effective fighting force and Mitscher's task force had been completely wiped out. The Emperor and cabinet met and were advised of a glorious victory; that army and navy forces acting in close cooperation had intercepted the enemy fleet and after valiant fighting, greatly damaged it. The I.G.H. announced a total of fifty-three American vessels sunk or damaged, of which sixteen were carriers.

The dissemination of false information continued through the landings at Leyte and as late as 21 October the Japanese press announced that the victory over American forces surpassed the Japanese victory at Pearl Harbor.<sup>2</sup> These exaggerated reports were due in part to the inexperience of the Japanese pilots and their limited knowledge of the U.S. fleet. Failure to correctly report contact location and improper ship identification caused I.G.H. to the sortie of Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima's Second Strike Force from the Inland Sea on 15 October to finish off the cripples of the U.S. fleet that had allegedly been defeated off Formosa. After Shima sortied into the North Philippine Sea he was recalled before contacting the U.S. forces, which were still at full strength and could have easily destroyed Shima's force. The Second Strike Force was then sent to the Pescadores Islands to await further orders and

assignment for the coming battle.

### Japanese Readiness

With a planned fleet readiness date of late November, the indications of possible American landings in mid-October created significant problems for Ozawa's carrier task force. The shortened timetable did not afford time for Ozawa's carriers to transit to Lingga for training and workups with Kurita's surface group. Although the repair work to battle damage had been completed, the shortage of planes and more importantly, carrier deck qualified pilots, caused Admiral Toyoda to place the carrier planes at land bases in Formosa and the Philippines. In his judgement the pilots were insufficiently trained to operate from a flight deck, but could conduct operations from land bases.

This decision, combined with the earlier heavy losses of aircraft to Halsey's carrier planes, removed Ozawa's offensive strike capability. The Japanese aircraft carriers were relegated to a diversionary role, and made a sacrificial lamb for the fleet. Additionally hasty command changes created a complex fleet chain of command arrangement. Shima's Second Strike Force, originally assigned to support Ozawa, was assigned duties with Kurita. At the time of that change, Kurita was still at Lingga and Shima's force was enroute the Pescadores Islands. This modification of orders allowed Shima

no knowledge of Kurita's battle plans and related ongoing training. Vice Admiral Nishimura, with several old battleships and cruisers, was sent from the Inland Sea to join Kurita at Singapore. The reshuffling of commands created three fleets under independent commanders, each without knowledge of the operations plans of the other. Shima was under command of Commander, Southwest Area, Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa in Manila, and Kurita and Ozawa were directly under operational command of Admiral Toyoda, who was headquartered in Tokyo.

The Japanese Army and its commanders in the Philippines complicated the Navy's situation with concern about the overall chain of command structure and support the army was to provide for the Combined Fleet. Both services complained of a lack of satisfactory liaison with each other yet did nothing to rectify the problem. Of particular importance was the failure to coordinate the requirements for fleet air support while it passed through the narrow Philippine Islands seaways. This lack of air cover would prove disastrous for Kurita in the days to come. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, commander of the Japanese army forces in the Philippines, headquartered at Manila, had not been informed of the Navy plan until five days before it was activated. The Army Air Forces in the area were commanded by Field Marshal Hisaichi Terauchi from Saigon, while the fleet was commanded from Tokyo.

Diversity of command was not the only problem facing the Army and Navy. The concept and overall goal of SHO-I was not

agreed upon by the two services. From the naval perspective, in as important a battle as Leyte would be, it was mandatory to concentrate maximum naval power, fully supported by land-air power at the decisive time and place in order to deliver a concentrated force against the enemy. The Army believed that since a decisive ground battle would only be waged on Luzon, the defense of Leyte should be conducted with full strength Navy and Air Forces, but using only the in place ground forces currently on Leyte without reinforcements from the other islands.

The Army's plan to provide minimum ground forces was unrealistic. I.G.H. should have realized from previous defeats that if American forces gained an airfield on Leyte, air superiority over the entire northern Philippines, including Luzon, would quickly follow. With the loss of command of the air and American sea power controlling the surrounding seas, the concept goal of SHO-I would be easily defeated. The U.S. could bypass Luzon as had been done to other Japanese strongholds in the north and south Pacific. The Japanese Navy fully realized the importance of a decisive victory, but made critical errors with their forces that will be discussed later. The conduct of the Japanese Army and Navy toward the entire plan was service parochial and should have been resolved by I.G.H. The best means to gain the strategic objective of preventing a successful Philippine landing by the U.S. forces was not visualized by the Imperial General Headquarters Army



section. Gaining and maintaining sea control was the major factor required for U.S. success, but this objective was not agreed upon by the two services. Lack of Japanese interservice cooperation and disagreement on the overall American objective enabled the U.S. to be successful in the sea, air and land battles for Leyte. Had the Japanese controlled the sea, Japanese ground reinforcements could have been easily landed on Leyte and the land battle against any U.S. forces that may have gotten ashore would have been an easy victory for the Japanese Army.

#### Alert for the SHO Operation

The first Japanese intelligence report of American landings was received in Tokyo on 17 October. At 0719 the Japanese garrison sighted the U.S. Advance Force off Leyte Island. Admiral Toyoda, CinC Combined Fleet, initiated a simple message at 0819, "Alert for the SHO Operation", to commanding officers of fleets, squadrons and naval districts.\* At this point the timing of the entire operation began to unravel. Based upon the initial timetable, Japanese fleet penetration into Leyte Gulf would occur on 22 October. Almost immediately Toyoda learned that this schedule could not be met. Kurita's force required fuel at Brunei and Ozawa's carrier force aircraft would not be ready before 20 October. I.G.H. began concentrating air strength, mainly the Sixth Base Air Force

from Formosa, for movement to the Philippines.

As the fleet elements prepared for sailing, several command decisions were made that affected the entire operation. Admiral Toyoda was not in Tokyo, thus decisions were being made by his Chief of Staff, Vice Admiral Ryunosuke Kusaka. Kusaka transferred ships from the First Strike Force to the Second Strike Force of Vice Admiral Shima. The Second Force ships were then transferred to command of the SouthWest Area Force in Manila. This division of forces was in direct conflict with the Navy's need for concentrated forces at the point of attack. Kusaka also reset the timetable for Leyte Gulf penetration to 24 October, based on the inability of First Strike Force and the Main Body to meet the already rescheduled date of 22 October.

Fleet movement began at 0100 18 October when the First Strike Force sailed from Lingga enroute Brunei for refueling, Second Strike Force sailed from the Pescadores to Coron Bay and the Main Body continued underway preparations. The Japanese Air Bases began to launch attacks against both the U.S. carrier task forces and the amphibious ships in Leyte Gulf. The Expeditionary Force prepared to sail eight submarines on 19 October.

Contact reports on 19 October convinced the Japanese that the landings at Leyte were not a feint for an assault elsewhere. Intelligence reported to I.G.H. that a force of eleven aircraft carriers and one hundred transports were in the

Leyte area. Admiral Toyoda knew Japanese forces were operating in accordance with the SHO-I plan. Intelligence reports from Hollandia and the Admiralty Islands indicated massive ship movements enroute the Philippine area. As a result of these reports, Navy section I.G.H., informed the Army section I.G.H., that the Navy was finalizing plans for the Combined Fleet to penetrate Leyte Gulf as per the SHO-I plan.

Immediately the Army opposed the overall plan, proposing that the Navy adopt a policy to conserve fleet strength. The Navy was adamant on several points: they wanted to carry out the penetration of Leyte Gulf to destroy the invasion force and expected a decisive fleet action to occur. If they did not fight it out now, their ships would be forced back into Japanese waters and be slowly bled to death by lack of war supplies and fuel. Finally, if the Navy did not take the offensive now, the war would quickly be lost. The Army countered that the Navy should refrain from an operation that would risk total destruction; chances of success were slight; should the fleet lose, control of the South and East China Seas would be lost; and since the Combined Fleet had no carrier-based aircraft, land-based air support would have to be diverted from Army needs to provide fleet air cover.<sup>7</sup> At this point in the battle preparations it is almost inconceivable that these objections had not been voiced previously. The I.G.H. was unable to solve the diversion of thought between the two branches so each service went on without regard for the

plan of the other.

On 20 October the disagreement between the services was sorted out by the Chief of the Army General Staff who had originally opposed the Combined Fleet penetration into Leyte Gulf and had also refused to defend Leyte with forces other than those presently on the ground. The Army reconsidered its position and decided to defend Leyte with the maximum number of ground forces that could be brought into the area by the Navy. At 0813 20 October, the Chief of Staff Combined Fleet, issued the SHO-I battle plan. His direction to Japanese forces was as follows:

(1) First Strike Force would penetrate Leyte Gulf at dawn on 25 October (X-Day);

(2) Main Force, in cooperation with the First Strike Force, would maneuver in the area east of Luzon to divert the enemy to the north and, should a favorable opportunity arise, attack and destroy the enemy;

(3) Commander SW Area Force, commander of all naval air forces in the Philippines, in coordination with the First Strike Force, would destroy enemy carrier and invasion forces;

(4) Commander Sixth Base Air Force, advancing to the Philippines, and under Commander SW Area Force, would launch an all out offensive against the enemy task forces on 24 October (Y-Day)•

Kusaka also suggested to Kurita that he consider dividing his command into two groups to enter Leyte Gulf through San Bernardino Strait and Surigao Strait. This was the second time that the strength of the surface fleet was divided into smaller elements, another operational error before the fighting began.

Thus the SHO-I plan was not initiated until the amphibious

landings at Leyte had commenced. The Japanese Combined Fleet attack was scheduled for 25 October. This is certainly a questionable date for the timing of the initial attack. Why send a powerful surface fleet after a landing force that had already off-loaded troops and equipment. The most vulnerable time for the amphibious group was the first day of landings.

However, for the Japanese Fleet to fight its way into Leyte Gulf on 25 October could have had disastrous results for the Sixth Army. By A+5 (the numbering system for the operation used A-Day as the landing day) the majority of the troops on Leyte had sufficient supplies and support for only a few days operation. Had the Japanese interrupted the flow of logistic support, even for a short time, the Japanese troops counterattacking could have created a very critical situation. The U.S. Army had established their headquarters on the beaches, within range of the Japanese warship's guns in Leyte Gulf. More important was the absence of U.S. land-based air support on Leyte. The U.S. plans called for establishment of land-based support on A+5, however rain and ground conditions prohibited establishment of the airfields until almost a month after the landings except in several emergency situations. If Kurita and Nishimura could have reached the Gulf, U.S. forces ashore would have been at the mercy of the Japanese fleet. Kurita could have isolated troops ashore and destroyed any shipping and supplies in the area at his leisure. The effect of correct timing by the Japanese could have had incalculable

damage to the U.S. landing forces.

SHO-I, although complex, was a comprehensive workable plan for the defense of the Philippines. Internal factors caused problems for the Japanese commanders from the outset. The operational and tactical errors that occurred during the four sea battles are discussed in Chapter 4.

1. C. Vann Woodward, The Battle for Leyte Gulf, p.16
2. Vice Admiral S. Fukudome, "Strategic Aspects of the Battle off Formosa", U.S.Naval Institute Proceedings, LXXVIII, 1952, pp. 1287.
3. Masanori Ito, The End of the Imperial Japanese Navy, p. 116.
4. Andrieu d'Albas, Japanese Naval Action in World War II, p. 306.
5. Woodward, p. 22.
6. Samuel E. Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol XII, p. 160.
7. Quentin Pope, "Sidelights on the Second Battle of the Philippines", U.S.Naval Institute Proceedings, Vol. LXXII, 1946, pp. 308-310.
8. Ito, p. 124.

## CHAPTER III

### KING II - ASSAULT ON THE PHILIPPINES

#### Background

Early in 1944, based on the continued successes U.S. forces had experienced, the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave General MacArthur the go-ahead to prepare plans for a 15 November landing on Mindanao, the main southern island of the Philippine Archipelago. This landing would be the culmination of the efforts of two U.S. joint forces. Admiral Nimitz's movement across the northern and central Pacific and General MacArthur's northwesterly drive from New Guinea toward the Philippine Islands. The original JCS 1943 plan called for unconditional surrender of the Japanese, which might require an invasion of the Japanese home islands. The Philippines were the logical choice to establish a supply point for this assault for several reasons, including position in the sea lanes, liberation of a strong U.S. ally and excellent support facilities for a major assault against the Japanese.

General MacArthur planned a two phased landing for the Philippines, one in Mindanao on 25 October followed by Leyte on 15 November. As U.S. operations successfully continued to move rapidly westward, the JCS proposed accelerating the timetable by bypassing several previously stated objectives. The two area

commanders could not agree with each other or the JCS on specifics and it took a meeting in Pearl Harbor with President Roosevelt to resolve the plan. The Philippines would not be bypassed and Leyte would be the amphibious assault point with a target date set for 20 December 1944.

#### Change in Plans

Admiral William (Bull) Halsey sortied Task Force 38 from Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands on 28 August tasked with attacking and neutralizing the Japanese Air Forces on Yap, in the Palaus and on Mindanao. Halsey was also ordered to make a strike in the Bonin Islands. In addition to destroying Japanese aircraft, this strike would serve as a diversionary attack in an attempt to deceive the Japanese as to where the next U.S. attack would be conducted. Each strike was conducted with little if any opposition by the Japanese. The Mindanao strike was cancelled and replaced by an attack on the Visayas, the central group of the Philippine Islands, with the same results. On 13 September Halsey made a suggestion that may have shortened the war by a full year. He sent a message to Admiral Nimitz recommending that the landings at Yap, Palau, Morotai and Mindanao be cancelled as unnecessary, and that the troops which were to be used at these islands, as well as his command, Task Force 38, be made immediately available for MacArthur to seize Leyte. While this was a radical change to the planned



timetable, it was not without merit; Halsey, however, was not fully correct in his assessment of the Japanese. Although the Japanese forces had been weakened and were short pilots qualified for aircraft carrier duty, the I.G.H. held the remaining planes back for the assault known to be coming.

Ironically this news was not available to MacArthur. He was enroute Morotai onboard *USS Nashville*, maintaining radio silence. His Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General R.K. Sutherland, in Hollandia, immediately agreed with Halsey's proposal, knowing full well that MacArthur would concur. Sutherland knew that MacArthur fully grasped the tactical significance of fast carrier task forces and their ability to provide air support without the need for land-based airfields, so Sutherland felt safe with the decision. He notified Nimitz and JCS that if Halsey's recommendations were approved, MacArthur would invade Leyte on 20 October, two full months earlier than planned.<sup>1</sup>

The Combined Chiefs of Staff and President Roosevelt were in Quebec, Canada, at the OCTOGON Conference when the Halsey-Nimitz-MacArthur agreement reached them. On 15 September the decision to support the plan was immediately approved.

Having the utmost confidence in General MacArthur, Admiral Nimitz and Admiral Halsey, wrote General Marshall, it was not a difficult decision to make. Within 90 minutes after the signal had been received in Quebec, General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz had received their instructions to execute the Leyte operation.<sup>2</sup>

The logistic preparations caused by this radical shift of plans are beyond the scope of this paper, but needless to say it was a massive undertaking. The KING II plan was bold and far reaching. It required utilization of almost all the American fighting forces not engaged in Europe or on island outposts like the Aleutians. Australian troops were used to relieve United States troops in rear areas and the Australians then continued preparations for operations in the East Indies.

The overall change in plans at last led to planning ahead and decision making for the Pacific forces. Prior to the Leyte alteration, the JCS had been unable to decide on the path to Tokyo. Now it was decided that Formosa would be too costly in the long run. If Leyte went quickly, Luzon could be assaulted in late 1944, followed by Iwo Jima and Okinawa as suitable bases from which to launch the final invasions on Japan. Nimitz presented this plan to the JCS, and on 3 October the JCS issued Nimitz and MacArthur the following directive:

General MacArthur will liberate Luzon, starting 20 December, and establish bases there to support later operations. Admiral Nimitz will provide fleet cover and support, occupy one or more positions in the Bonin-Volcano Island group 20 January 1945, and invade the Ryukyus, target date 1 March 1945.<sup>3</sup>

#### U.S. Command Structure for KING II

Although the King II Operation was not a complex plan, the chain of command utilized by the JCS in the Pacific Theater was quite complicated.

The division of naval command for the Leyte operation was unique. Previously, naval command had been unified within clearly defined zones. As the two converging forces moved toward the Philippines the chain of command had been both separate and distinct. During the Central Pacific drive through the Gilberts, Marshalls, Marianas, and Carolines naval and amphibious forces had been under the command of Admiral Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas. In the drive from the Southwest Pacific, naval and amphibious forces were under a naval commander responsible to General MacArthur, commander-in-chief of the Southwest Pacific Area. Nimitz often sent ships to cover specific landing operations in MacArthur's area, but naval action had been of such scope that divided command had not been a problem. During action in the Solomons and movement to New Guinea Halsey had been in command of naval forces and was subordinate to MacArthur. MacArthur and Halsey had mutual respect for each other and Halsey often called his forces "MacArthur's Navy", so there were few if any command problems between the two.

The two fleets involved in the Leyte operation were the Third Fleet and its western Pacific Task Forces, now commanded by Admiral Halsey, and the Seventh Fleet and central Philippines Attack Force, under Vice Admiral Thomas Kinkaid. The immediate superior of Halsey was Admiral Nimitz, at Pearl Harbor, while Kinkaid reported to General MacArthur. Thus the two fleets, though supporting the same amphibious landing, had

no common superior below the JCS in Washington, D.C. The inherent disadvantages of this situation were clearly recognized but it was felt that consultation between Halsey and Kinkaid would overcome any co-ordination problems.

Two problems common today, even with the improved electronics and communications ships and staffs have available, were also evident during the Leyte operation. First, communications so vital in all operations, played a major role in this operation. The two fleets were spread over a wide area with a massive volume of radio traffic and requirements for extra command circuits to be maintained. This set-up would tax any size ship's communication system and proved to be a hindrance as the battle progressed. Second, dividing the chain of command gives multiple opportunities for different interpretation of operation orders, mission concepts and ships movements. The co-ordination required for as extensive an operation as this would be difficult against a single force, however the Third and Seventh Fleets would ultimately deal with three separate enemy forces, each which had several possible courses of action and approach to the battle area, and this would cause several anxious periods during the battle.

A total of four commands without a common superior other than the Joint Chiefs of Staff were involved in the Leyte Gulf operation.

The naval commands are included in this list for continuity:

I. General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander Southwest Pacific Area, commanded all ground forces, some air forces and the Seventh Fleet.

Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, Commander Seventh Fleet, now designated Commander Central Philippines Attack force.

Northern Attack Force, commanded by Rear Admiral D.E. Barbey with X Corps ground forces, commanded by Major General Franklin C. Sibert.

Southern Attack Force, commanded by Vice Admiral Theodore Wilkinson with XXIV Corps ground forces, commanded by Major General J.R. Hodge.

Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, Commanding General Sixth Army, now Commander Expeditionary Force.

II. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, including Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet and the VII Army Air Force.

III. General H.H. Arnold commanded the XX Army Air Force with his deputy, Major General Curtis E. Lemay.

IV. General J.W. Stilwell of the China-Burma-India command, with the XIV Army Air Force.\*

### KING II Operation Plan

On 21 September 1944, Lieutenant General Krueger received General MacArthur's Operations Instruction Number 70, the integrated plan for all previously issued instructions. In the same plan Admiral Kinkaid was given the following instructions:

1. To transport and establish landing forces ashore in the Leyte Gulf-Surigao Strait area, as arranged with the Commanding General, Sixth U.S. Army.
2. To support the operation by:-
  - (a) Providing air protection for convoys and direct air support for the landing and subsequent operations, including anti-submarine patrol of the Gulf and combat air patrol over the amphibious ships and craft, from his escort carriers;
  - (b) Lifting reinforcements and supplies to Leyte in naval assault shipping;
  - (c) Preventing Japanese reinforcement by sea of its Leyte garrison;
  - (d) Opening the Surigao Strait for Allied use, and sending Naval Forces into "Visayan waters" to support current and future operations;
  - (e) Providing submarine reconnaissance, lifeguard service and escort-of-convoy.®

Admiral Nimitz's Operation Plan 8-44 issued to Admiral Halsey on 27 September read as follows:-

To cover and support the Leyte Operation by:-

- (a) Striking Okinawa, Formosa and Northern Leyte on 10-13 October;
- (b) Striking Bicol peninsula, Leyte, Cebu and Negros and supporting the landing on Leyte, on 16-20 October;

(c) Operating in strategic support of the Leyte Operation by destroying enemy naval and air forces threatening the Philippines area, on and after 21 October.\*

Halsey had written a message to Nimitz on 24 September, discussing operation and tactical plans. In the message he also clearly stated his philosophy of battle. Halsey had been in CinC Pac Fleet HQ during the June 1944 Battle of the Philippine Sea, when Admiral Spruance commanded Fifth (Third) Fleet, and he knew how closely Spruance missed engaging the Japanese Fleet. That battle served to add to Halsey's basic point of view, expressed often during the war, that if the chance occurred for him to destroy the Japanese Fleet with his Third Fleet Fast Carrier Task Force, he would move to do so without question. "I feel that every weapon in the Pacific should be brought to bear if and when the enemy fleet sorties," he wrote Nimitz.7

In early October Nimitz responded to Halsey,

You are always free to make local decisions in connection with the handling of forces placed in your command. Often it will be necessary for you to take action not previously contemplated because of local situations which may develop quickly and in the light of information which has come to you and which may not be available to me. My only requirement in such case is that I be informed as fully and early as possible.\*

This letter emphasized what Halsey wanted most, the power to make decisions. From this set of letters, it is evident that Halsey intended to take it to the Japanese Fleet at the very first opportunity. Nimitz knew how his Third Fleet commander

felt. In a letter dated 8 October Nimitz indicated that Halsey would stay at sea as ComThirdFleet through the Philippine operation and that Spruance would take over as ComFifthFleet for the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. This decision indicated the judgement of Admirals King and Nimitz about their Pacific commanders. While the Third and Fifth Fleets were often called interchangeable commands, they were not really so. When Spruance (Fifth Fleet) was used, Nimitz gave him responsibility for taking and holding territory, and as protection from incursions by the Japanese Fleet into U.S. controlled waters. When Halsey (Third Fleet) was used, his superiors knew he would concentrate on destroying the enemy forces so operation plans were made accordingly. Halsey's task in the Philippines would be almost entirely to hunt the Japanese Fleet and knock out Japanese air. Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet was given responsibility for the Leyte landings with Rear Admiral Barbey in support."

This message traffic set the stage for the most controversial decision by a U.S. commander during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Halsey had an overriding objective assigned by Admiral Nimitz apart from and independent from General MacArthur's objective. Halsey was the sole judge of his primary duty, and nothing in his orders or operation plan required him to obtain MacArthur's concurrence for any action he chose to take, or even advise MacArthur if Halsey changed plans.



### Putting King II into Action

When the operations orders of General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz were issued, the plans for landing in the Philippines commenced. The U.S. advance forces arrived off Leyte Island and were sighted by Japanese lookouts at 0719 17 October. Bad weather and rough seas prohibited the advance forces from completing all objectives; however, despite the conditions, landings on Suluan and Dinagat Islands at the entrance to Leyte Gulf were accomplished. Minesweeps completed their work at the entrance to the channel despite the foul weather and the main amphibious force was enroute the landing area from Hollandia and Manus Island, having gotten underway on 13 October. Admiral Halsey's TF 38 was operating east of Luzon conducting air searches for Admiral Shima's Second Strike Force, which it failed to find. Shima was still in the Pescadores Islands on 17 October. Late in the day Halsey redirected his efforts to support the Seventh Fleet advance force enroute Leyte.

On 18 October the weather improved over the entire area, enabling U.S. advance forces to land on Homonhon Island, another entrance island, where no Japanese were found. The minesweeps continued working in Leyte Gulf, continuing to find and clear numerous mines. Aircraft from Admiral Kinkaid's escort carriers were within range of the landing area and commenced supporting the advance forces with combat air patrol

and air strikes on Leyte Island. This allowed TF 38 to conduct strikes on Luzon and refuel from the fleet oilers in the Philippine Sea. The amphibious task force continued its transit to the landing area in an uneventful manner.

During these several days U.S. forces missed one of the best opportunities of the battle. Kurita's First Strike Force was in port Lingga and did not sortie until 0100 on 18 October. U.S. intelligence sources suspected the location of the Strike Force but failed to capitalize on the fact that Lingga was well within range for General Arnold's China based XX Army Air Force. MacArthur had sent several strongly worded requests that the anchorage and roadstead be reconnoitered however the B-29s never flew to the area until the Battle for Leyte Gulf was over. A missed opportunity for the U.S. to destroy the most powerful remaining Japanese Fleet before the landing started.

In addition to the Army Air Force's missed opportunity, Commander Submarine Force Pacific, Vice Admiral Charles Lockwood, also made a decision that had significant effects on the upcoming battle. On 15 October COMSUBPAC had positioned a submarine wolfpack at Bungo Suido, the entrance and exit from the Inland Sea, for special reconnaissance. On 19 October these submarines were directed to return to their regular patrol areas and missed the sortie of Ozawa's carriers on 20 October through the same waters the wolfpack had occupied a day earlier. Another missed opportunity for the U.S. forces.

Excellent weather on 19 October allowed the advanced

forces to complete all preparations for the amphibious landings scheduled for 20 October (A-Day). The fire support ships conducted shore bombardment of the beaches and suspected Japanese areas, minesweepers pursued their slow work of sweeping the assault lanes and the escort carriers planes flew air support for the landing preparations. TF 38 aircraft continued air attacks on Luzon and conducted air searches of the San Bernardino Straits while preparing to support General MacArthur's operations in Leyte Gulf. The amphibious task force continued its approach to Leyte and as the day ended, advanced operations were complete, the objective area was ready for the next day's assault landings and the amphibious units which were making the landings were sailing into Leyte Gulf.

Thus the stage was set. The American fleet and amphibious forces were positioned to commence landings in the Philippines. The Japanese knew the location of the enemy forces and had activated their plan to defeat them. The opposing forces were moving into position to engage in the greatest sea battle ever fought. Although the fleets would not attack each other for several days, American and Japanese soldiers on Leyte Island would begin killing each other within hours. The ships and planes of the two fleets would have to wait for a few days for their phase of the battle to begin.

1. Samuel E. Morison, History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XII, pp. 12-14.

2. Ibid., p.15.

3. Ibid., p. 18.

4. M. Hamlin Cannon, United States Army in World War II, The History of the War in the Pacific, Leyte: The Return to the Philippines, Vol. V., p. 25.

5. Morison, p. 57.

6. Ibid.

7. Edwin Hoyt, How They Won the War in the Pacific, pp. 423.

8. Ibid., p. 428.

9. Morison, pp.57-60.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BATTLE OF LEYTE GULF

#### Opening Phase

The alert order for SHO-I was issued at 0809 17 October. Admiral Kurita's First Strike Force sortied from Lingga and arrived at Brunei on Borneo the evening of 20 October. From Brunei he could not reach Leyte Gulf before 25 October. General MacArthur's Army forces had made the initial landings on 17 October and within the first day had broken through the Japanese Army's first line of defense. It was evident the U.S. transports would be unloaded by 22 or 23 October and that most of the prime targets of the landing fleet would be gone from Leyte. Admiral Kurita's officers protested using the fleet for sacrifice:

We do not mind death, but we are very concerned for the honor of the Japanese Navy. If the final effort of our great Navy should be spent engaging a group of empty cargo ships, surely Admirals Togo and Yamamoto would weep in their graves.<sup>1</sup>

The strength of the protests caused Admiral Kurita to call a conference of his officers aboard his flagship *Atago* on the evening they sortied from Brunei.

His message to the group:

I know that many of you are strongly opposed to this assignment. But the war situation is far more critical than any of you can possibly know. Would it not be a shame to have the fleet remain intact while our nation perishes? I believe that Imperial General Headquarters is giving us a glorious opportunity. Because I realize how very serious the war situation actually is, I am willing to accept even the ultimate assignment to storm Leyte Gulf.

You must all remember that there are such things as miracles. What man can say that there is no chance for our fleet to turn the tide of war in a decisive battle? We shall have a chance to meet our enemies. We shall engage his task forces. I hope that you will not carry your responsibilities lightly. I know that you will act faithfully and well.<sup>2</sup>

On the eve of its final sortie the Japanese Fleet was a magnificent sight at anchor in Brunei Bay. The sight could inspire confidence even without the aircraft carriers necessary to defeat the American Navy. After Kurita's stirring speech Japanese officers and men held great hope that this armada could swing the war in Japan's favor.

The fleet composition entering the battle was as follows:

Second Fleet (Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita)

Batdiv 1 (*Yamato, Musashi, Nagato*)  
Batdiv 3 (*Kongo, Haruna*)  
Crudiv 4 (*Atago, Takao, Maya, Chokai*)  
Crudiv 5 (*Myoko, Haguro*)  
Crudiv 7 (*Kumano, Suzuya, Tone, Chikuma*)  
Desron 2 (*Yahagi, Noshiro* and 12 Destroyers)

Fifth Fleet (Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima)

Crudiv 21 (*Ashigara, Nachi*)  
Desron 1 (*Abukuma* and 4 Destroyers)

Nishimura Force (Vice Admiral Shoji Nishimura)  
Batdiv 2 (*Yamashiro, Fuso*)  
Desdiv 4 (*Mogami* and 4 Destroyers)

### Sortie

NOTE: For ease of discussion and in keeping with published reference books on the Battle for Leyte Gulf the Japanese forces will be named as follows: Kurita's force (Central Force); Nishimura's force (Southern Force) and Ozawa's carrier force (Northern Force); Shima's Fifth Fleet, assigned a supporting role by CinC Combined Fleet is considered part of the Southern Force.

Kurita's Central Force departed Brunei at 0800 22 October divided into two groups heading northward through the Palawan Passage enroute Mindoro Strait. The force steamed at 18 knots zigzagging in an attempt to avoid U.S. submarine attacks. At dawn on 23 October two U.S. subs, *Darter* and *Dace*, established radar contact on the Japanese force and immediately radioed a contact report to COMSUBFAC, who in turn relayed the report to Admiral Halsey. This was to be one of the most important contact reports of the war. *Darter* and *Dace* had located the Central Force, whose location was a mystery to Naval Intelligence, since departing Lingga. The two subs conducted attacks and sank Kurita's flagship, *Atago*, from under him. In addition they sunk two other cruisers and Kurita, after being rescued from the South China Sea by a destroyer, shifted his flag to the super battleship, *Yamato*.

Prior to dawn on 24 October, the Central Force changed course to the east, south of Mindoro Island into the Sibuyan Sea. Kurita shifted his formation to a circular antiaircraft

defense for the expected carrier plane attacks.

Vice Admiral Nishimura's Southern Force departed Brunei at 1500 22 October transiting through the Balabac Strait into the Sulu Sea, enroute Leyte Gulf via Surigao Strait, to complete the planned pincer movement with the Central Force at dawn on 25 October. Since this track was shorter than Kurita's, the Southern Force had a slower speed of advance to the rendezvous. This force was significantly smaller than the Central Force and was formed only after the Chief of Staff Combined Fleet suggested that Kurita divide his force for the attack on Leyte. Nishimura's battleships were thirty years old and, though armed with fourteen inch main batteries, were slow and had limited endurance and maneuverability. They had been used mainly for training during the war and were pressed into offensive service only by the importance of this battle. Because of these limitations Kurita gave Nishimura the separate route with full expectation that the force might be destroyed enroute. Admiral Nishimura, truly an "old sea dog", accepted Kurita's order and commented to an officer giving him advice, "Bah! We'll do our best."<sup>3</sup>

Nishimura's force, steaming eastward across the Sulu Sea, reached the entrance of the Mindanao Sea early on 24 October without being detected by U.S. forces.



### U.S. Carrier Task Force Disposition

The disposition and composition of Task Force 38 played one of the most significant roles in the battle. TF 38 was commanded by Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, subordinate to COMTHIRDFLT, Admiral Halsey. Mitscher was unique in that he worked for two commanders at different times. CINCPACFLT simply changed the designation of TF 38 to TF 58. Admiral Mitscher was the constant between the two fleets. He stayed at sea with his ships, planes and men, while his immediate superior in command changed. He was the most experienced United States Navy carrier admiral and was the acknowledged expert in fast carrier warfare. As Commander Task Force 38 his command was broken into four task groups. TG 38.1, commanded by Vice Admiral John S. McCain, had three fleet and two light carriers, six cruisers and fourteen destroyers; TG 38.2, commanded by Rear Admiral Gerald F. Bogan, had one fleet and two light carriers, two battleships, three cruisers and sixteen destroyers; TG 38.3, commanded by Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman, had two fleet and two light carriers, two battleships, four cruisers and thirteen destroyers; TG 38.4, commanded by Rear Admiral Ralph E. Davison, had two fleet and two light carriers, two battleships, two cruisers and fifteen destroyers. Halsey was embarked in *New Jersey* in TG 38.2 and Mitscher was in *Lexington* in TG 38.3. Describing the conditions the men in his command faced in the Pacific in October 1944 Mitscher wrote:

No other period of the Pacific War included as much intensive operating as the past two months. Probably 10,000 men have never put foot on shore during this period of ten months. No force in the world has been subjected to such a period of constant operation without rest or rehabilitation.\*

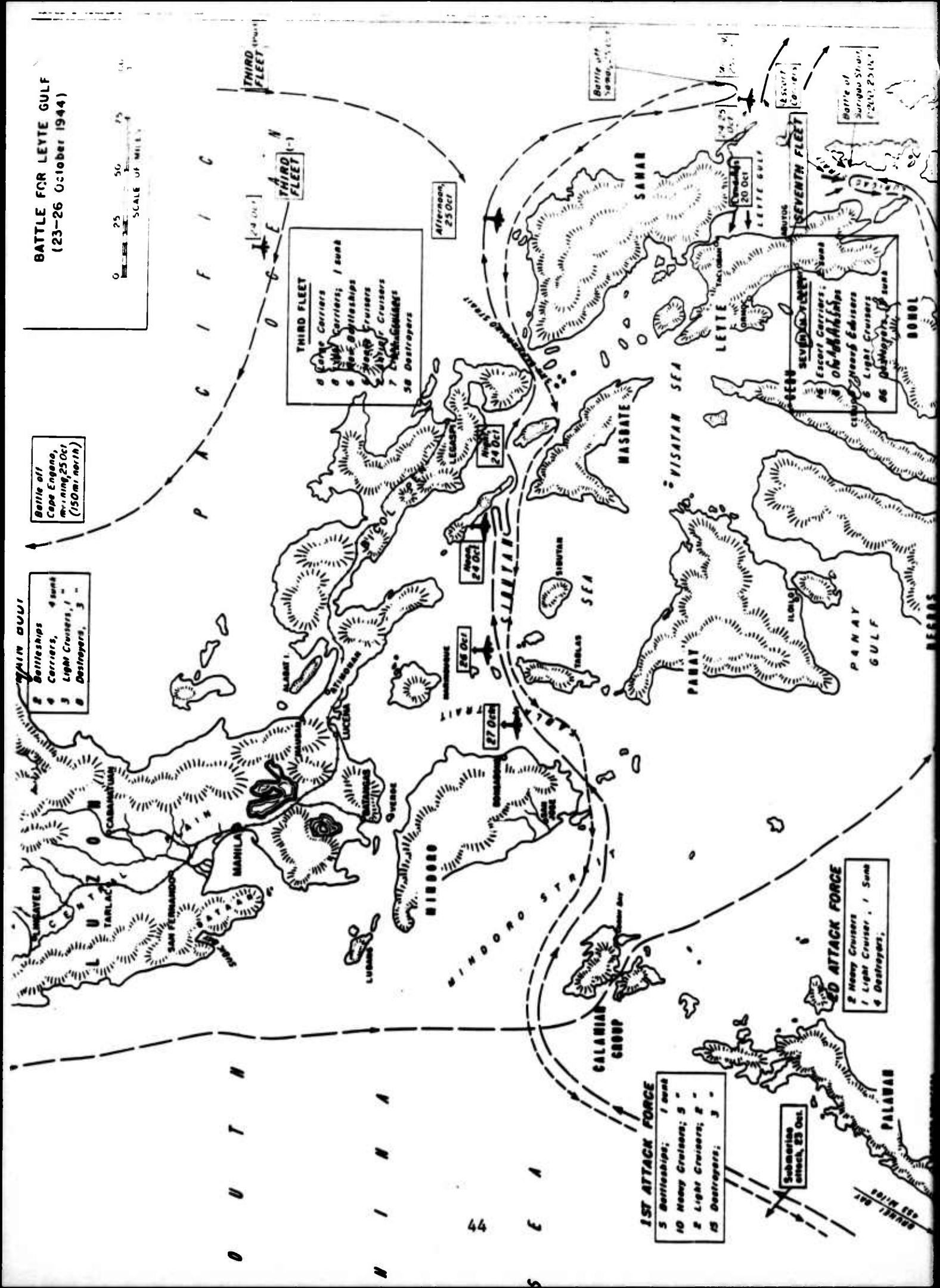
Early on 24 October the TG's were positioned about 200 miles east of the Philippines on a northwest/southeast orientation. TG 38.3 was to the north off central Luzon; TG 38.2 was east of San Bernardino Strait, between Luzon and Samar; TG 38.4 was off southern Samar Island just north of Leyte Gulf; and TG 38.1 had been detached to proceed to Ulithi to refuel, rearm and rest, but was immediately recalled after Halsey received the contact reports on Kurita's Central Force.

#### The Battle of the Sibuyan Sea

On 24 October the weather for flying was ideal and the dawn launch search planes were tasked to comb the Sibuyan, Sulu and Mindanao Seas to locate any elements of the Japanese fleet. Oddly the area north and northeast of Luzon was not searched. This was the largest open water area near the Philippines and was the logical operating area for Ozawa's Northern Force, which had sortied undetected from the Inland Sea on 21 October. Ozawa, wishing to be located to lure TF 38 from the San Bernardino area, remained unlocated by the U.S. forces, despite his extensive use of radio signals and search planes, while attempting to give away his position.

2	Battleships	4	Subs
4	Carriers,	1	"
3	Light Cruisers,	3	"
8	Destroyers,	3	"

0 25 50  
SCALE OF MILL



44

**1ST ATTACK FORCE**

5 Battleships;	1 Sub
10 Heavy Cruisers;	5 "
2 Light Cruisers;	2 "
15 Destroyers;	3 "

**Submarine attack, 23 Oct.**

**2D ATTACK FORCE**

- 2 Heavy Cruisers
- 1 Light Cruiser, 1 Sub
- 4 Destroyers,

Kurita's Central Force was located in the early morning by search planes from TG 38.2 and the first strike of carrier aircraft struck the Japanese force before noon. Follow-up strikes continued throughout the day and a total of over 250 sorties in five different strike periods were made against Central Force. While the success of the U.S. planes was significant it must be remembered that there was no Japanese air cover to protect the Central Force. At one point during the attacks, Kurita sent a message to I.G.H. and the Fifth Base Air Force on Luzon:

The First Striking Force is engaged in hard fight in Sibuyan Sea. Enemy air attacks are expected to increase. Request land-based air forces and Mobile Force (Ozawa's carriers) to make prompt attacks on enemy carrier forces estimated to be at Lamon Bay.<sup>2</sup>

The Japanese Air Forces had made their best attempt against the carriers of TF 38 earlier that day. Three separate raids of sixty planes each from Luzon concentrated on TG 38.3 off central Luzon. These planes were easily covered by U.S. fighter combat air patrol, but did succeed in sinking the light carrier, *Princeton*. U.S. pilots, though achieving success against Kurita's force, made several errors that contributed to later events of the battle. The early strike identified the two super battleships in the Central Force, *Yamato* and *Musashi*, and these two dreadnoughts were the primary targets for the rest of the day. *Musashi* was badly damaged early and separated from the force. Succeeding strikes concentrated so heavily on her that

the rest of the ships received minimal damage. The damage reports submitted to Admiral Halsey's staff from the attacking pilots were exaggerated, giving the impression that the Central Force had received more damage than the ships actually received. Disregarding the severity of these attacks, Admiral Kurita's ships pressed toward San Bernardino Strait at 20 knots.

Nishimura's Southern Force in the Sulu Sea had launched a scout float plane from a cruiser to reconnoiter the U.S. forces in Leyte Gulf. The scout plane reached Leyte and reported twelve aircraft carriers, four battleships, several cruisers along with eighty transports in the bay. The pilot also reported numerous destroyers and torpedo boats near Surigao Strait to Nishimura, who radioed the information to Kurita. Two problems were encountered. The pilot did not report the carriers as small escort type carriers and Admiral Kurita never received the report. Communications between the Japanese forces were almost non-existent during the battle, significantly contributing to the failure of coordination and massing of forces as SHO-I planned.

Search planes from TG 38.4 located Nishimura's Force in the Sulu Sea during the early morning. This was the first knowledge Admiral Halsey had of the Southern Force, however, despite this information Halsey adhered to the decision he had made earlier in the morning to consolidate the carrier task groups together off San Bernardino. This decision took the

planes from 38.4 out of range to Nishimura's ships. Based upon intelligence evaluation of the strengths of each force, Halsey had decided to use maximum force against the Central Force. The positions of the two Japanese forces would allow them to reach Leyte Gulf by morning on 25 October, and based on damage reports and visual identification provided by the carrier pilots, Halsey deemed the Central force as the one to destroy. The puzzle was beginning to come together, but the Japanese carriers were still unlocated and were the primary thought in Halsey's mind.

Admiral Shima's Fifth Fleet had refueled at Coron Bay and sortied for Leyte on 24 October. Shima had received only limited information about the plans of Admirals Kurita and Nishimura by this time. During the past several weeks his force had been treated like the stepchild of the Japanese Navy. He had been assigned to three different commanders within two weeks, none of which was sure what to do with his ships. Without any pre-battle guidance, without specific orders from Kurita or Nishimura, and without knowing the suicidal nature of the operation, his small force crossed the Sulu Sea well astern of Nishimura without joining that group.

Ironically the ships in Shima's force were the type needed by Admiral Nishimura for the upcoming battle. The highly maneuverable cruisers were suited for close fighting in confined waters against fast small targets. The I.G.H. intended that Nishimura would command Shima's forces however the weakly

worded operations order failed to make the command relationship clear, and an early career disagreement between the two commanders would not allow either to save face and be subordinate to the other. Thus the two forces were sent into the same battle area without a senior commander in charge. As a result, Nishimura proceeded independently and Shima, equally independent, followed an hour behind.

At 1555 Admiral Kurita made a tactical decision that led to the most discussed question of the battle: why did Halsey leave San Bernardino unguarded? Just as his ships were about to enter into the narrowest passage of the transit, Kurita ordered a course reversal, sending the following message to I.G.H.:

As a result of five aerial attacks from 0630 to 1530, our damages are not light. The frequency and numerical strength of these enemy attacks is increasing. If we continue our present course our losses will increase incalculably, with little hope of success for our mission.

Therefore, have decided to withdraw outside the range of enemy air attack for the time being, and to resume our sortie in coordination with successful attacks on the enemy by our air forces.\*

Though I.G.H. considered this reversal as improper, tactically it was a sound maneuver. Central Force had been delayed approximately six hours by the air attacks. The timetable for a combined attack with Nishimura could not be achieved and Kurita saved his ships from further damage by U.S. aircraft. Had the ships negotiated the approaches to San Bernardino Straits during the remaining daylight hours they would have been easy targets for destruction. A single U.S.

plane remained after the 1535 strike to monitor movement of Kurita's Force. One hour later, when that scout plane departed, the Central Force was still steaming away from San Bernardino Strait. This was the last U.S. contact report on the embattled Japanese fleet as darkness set in. The termination of surveillance of a large enemy force in any situation is a tactical error. In this case it proved to be a blunder that almost had disastrous results for Admiral Kinkaid and the landing force at Leyte Gulf. Halsey's last report was that the Central Force was in shambles and disengaging.

The concern for Ozawa's unlocated carrier force was intense in flag plot on Halsey's flagship, *New Jersey*, and also in Mitscher's Combat Information Center in *Lexington*. While it was Mitscher's Task Force, Halsey had effectively taken him out of the command picture during the last twenty-four hours. As stated earlier, Mitscher was the most experienced carrier Task Force commander in the Navy and his Chief of Staff was one of, if not the most, battle proven surface officer in the Pacific, Commodore Arleigh Burke. For Admiral Halsey to bypass this quality of experience during the most significant sea battle of the war was ludicrous, yet Halsey ran the Task Force for the majority of the engagement without consulting his Task Force commander.

The question remained - if this was to be an all-out attack, where were the Japanese aircraft carriers? Mitscher felt the aircraft attacking the U.S. task force were carrier



based planes and since TG 38.3 was farthest north and had received that attack, the logical search area was to the northwest. At 1155 Mitscher directed Rear Admiral Sherman to have aircraft search the sector between bearings 350 and 040 degrees from TG 38.3. About this time another Japanese air attack began and the search plan was scrubbed to defend the task group. Finally at mid-afternoon a search group was sent to the designated sector and at 1640 contact on a large Japanese force was reported by two different planes. The aircraft were at the edge of radio transmission range and the reports were garbled. Although the pilots had seemingly sighted two different groups, they had actually located Ozawa's Northern Force, dispersed into two separate formations. The force dispersion is significant, for reported errors of its composition forced Halsey's decision. Ozawa had one fleet carrier, three light carriers, two converted battleships, three light cruisers and ten destroyers. The carriers had very few aircraft available for duty. The group was reported by U.S. search planes as four carriers, four battleships, twelve cruisers and destroyers. When the two pilots landed on *Lexington* they were grilled by Admiral Mitscher and Commodore Burke. After putting the locating data and force composition information together it was too late to launch an attack on Ozawa's force, however their location placed the last piece into the puzzle for Admiral Halsey.

### Admiral Halsey's Decision

The results of the last two U.S. air strikes on the Central Force reported optimistic battle damage. Embarked in *New Jersey*, Halsey did not have direct access to pilot's reports. He was basing his decisions on filtered information obtained over radio circuits and from information processed by his intelligence staff. U.S. intelligence was deficient during this battle. They failed to provide locating data on large ship group movements. They did not have an accurate figure for available Japanese aircraft carriers and battleships, the two types of capital ships that must be accounted for during an oceanic war. It was difficult therefore to piece together the pilot's reports on Japanese ships and to provide commanders with accurate data on which to base operational decisions.

Admiral Kurita, continuing in his dogged pursuit of the SHO-I objectives, reversed course at 1715 and once again headed for Leyte Gulf via San Bernardino Strait. He fully expected to meet the U.S. fleet as he exited or at least to be attacked by submarines, however he and his men were prepared for the sacrifice. Little did he know of the decision being made by his opposite number in flag plot on *New Jersey*. Admiral Halsey was making one of the most momentous tactical decisions of naval warfare. It was entirely Halsey's decision, arrived at with incomplete and faulty information, without time to wait for further information and with no means to obtain information

that was needed. He did not have time for further study or analysis of contact reports and photos taken during the day. What was known was that three Japanese forces were intent on converging on Leyte Gulf and that it was up to the U.S. fleet to prevent the enemy from achieving that objective.

Admiral Halsey said three courses of action were open to him:

(a) Divide the forces, leaving Task Force 34 to block San Bernardino Straits while carriers with light screens attacked the Northern Force;

(b) Maintain integrity of our own entire striking strength, concentrated off the San Bernardino Straits;

(c) Strike the Northern Force with all of our own striking strength concentrated, and leave San Bernardino Straits unguarded.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the alternatives was weighed and the third option chosen as the course of action.

#### Task Force 34

Earlier in the afternoon, about two hours before contact with the Northern force had been gained, Admiral Halsey transmitted a battle plan to Task Force 38, announcing the formation of TF 34. Task Force 34 would be a surface action group, comprised of four battleships, five cruisers and two destroyer squadrons. Halsey would be officer-in-tactical command (OTC) and Vice Admiral Willis Lee, Commander Battleships Pacific Fleet, in *U.S.S. Washington*, would command

the battle line. This surface force would engage the Central Force if it sortied from the San Bernardino Strait. A follow up dispatch explained that TF 34 would be formed when directed by Halsey if the enemy sortied. Earlier Mitscher had proposed a similar organization to go after the Northern Force, feeling that the U.S. surface action group could handle Ozawa in a night action. Both Mitscher and Kinkaid, to the south at Leyte with the landing force, assumed TF 34 would remain in the vicinity of the Straits to block Japanese passage into the Philippine Sea. Wording of the two dispatches led Kinkaid to believe that his northern flank was adequately covered by the Third Fleet. Admiral Nimitz and Halsey had a unique understanding regarding the destruction of the Japanese Fleet. This priority and Halsey's belief in the strength of the Northern Force took precedence over the Central Force. At 2020 Halsey gave the order for TG's 38.2,.3 & .4 to rendezvous on a northward course with Mitscher as OTC to deliver a dawn attack on Ozawa's Force. The entire weight of the Third Fleet carrier force, more than ninety warships, instead of Mitscher's proposed smaller surface group, was sent against Ozawa's nineteen ship force. All assets were pulled away from San Bernardino Strait; not even a picket destroyer was left to monitor activity in the area."

This is one of the most discussed U.S. Navy decisions of the past forty-five years. Certainly Halsey had options. It was not a case of either-or. He had ninety ships, the most powerful

armada of the war, and could easily have destroyed both the Central and Northern Forces. The three TG's, even without the battleships of TF 34, were more than enough to soundly defeat Ozawa's aircraft carriers and reconstructed battleships. The battle line of TF 34 could have remained to the south to engage any Japanese attempts to reach Leyte via San Bernardino. Halsey's poor intelligence information and the assumptions that information caused partially dictated the actions. Shortly after informing Kinkaid he was going north, Halsey received information the Kurita had reversed course and was proceeding through San Bernardino, but he assumed that the force was too heavily damaged to be serious menace to Kinkaid. Several of the senior officers in the Task Force radioed Halsey with "suggestions" on alternate plans. These officers were rebuffed by Halsey's staff officers saying they had all the information needed, thus the combined experience and expert advice of some of the most combat tested officers in the Pacific was disregarded by Halsey in his obsession to destroy the Japanese Fleet.

By late on 24 October, despite the errors made by both the U.S. and Japanese commands, the SHO-I plan was remarkably close to success. Ozawa's Northern Force had achieved its objective by luring Halsey's fleet away from San Bernardino. Kurita would have an open ocean as he attempted to reach Leyte and Nishimura, with Shima astern, was on schedule to reach Leyte Gulf on the morning of 25 October. The ineffectiveness of two

branches of the Japanese forces, aircraft and submarines, made the U.S. task of destroying the Japanese surface ships a one dimension battle problem.

#### Crossing the "T" in Surigao Strait

Vice Admiral Kinkaid, COMSEVENTHFLEET, in command of "MacArthur's Navy" for the Leyte operation, had absolutely no doubt about the intentions of Nishimura's Southern Force. During the afternoon of 24 October Kinkaid directed Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf to form a night patrol and battle disposition across the northern entrance of Surigao Strait and prepare to meet the enemy. Oldendorf's command had six battleships, several which had been damaged at Pearl Harbor, eight cruisers, twenty seven destroyers and thirty three motor torpedo boats to employ. With these forces he set up the classic battle line across the expected Japanese approach channel. He used a defense in depth plan, utilizing eleven sections of three PT boats at strategic points in the narrow waters, followed by port and starboard groups of destroyers after the PT's cleared the area and lastly two formidable battle lines, one formed by the cruisers and the second by the battleships. There was only one concern for the ships about to conduct the surface engagement. The battleships had been ammo loaded for shore bombardment for Yap rather than surface action and the rapid change in timetable had not given them time to

rearm. Moreover they had used over half of the ammunition during the bombardment of Leyte prior to the landings. The decision was made to hold the battleship's fire until the range of the Japanese targets was between 17,000 and 20,000 yards. Oldendorf's destroyers had no replacement torpedoes and were at twenty percent 5-inch ammo level. Despite these shortfalls, the "Gun Club" as the large surface combatants were called had no doubt they would destroy anything the Japanese would send their way. Oldendorf expressed the group's feelings in his pre-battle intentions message to Admiral Kinkaid,

My theory is that of an old-time gambler: Never give a sucker a chance. If my opponent is foolish to come at me with an inferior force, I'm certainly not going to give him an even break."

This is the maelstrom Nishimura was headed toward during the afternoon and evening hours. The Southern Force, encountering limited attacks, was about three hours ahead of schedule and at least six hours ahead of the schedule set by Kurita for the simultaneous attack. By getting so far off the timetable, Nishimura put himself in position to face an overwhelming enemy force alone, even after receiving a Kurita message readjusting the schedule to rendezvous at 0900 25 October. By maintaining course and speed Nishimura resolutely proceeded onward to destruction. This attitude had severe effects both on his force and later in the day on Kurita's. Had Nishimura adjusted his timing to meet the more difficult transit Kurita had to negotiate he would have succeeded in completing the pincer movement as planned in SHO-I.

Additionally he would have allowed Shima to join his force prior to commencing the battle, concentrating forces and may have swung the entire tide of battle for the Japanese. Instead, in a three hour period during the night of 25 October, every ship and thousands of sailors in Nishimura's force except one destroyer were sunk by Admiral Oldendorf's battle line. The U.S. plan was executed so precisely and effectively that it also severely damaged Shima's force entering the battle behind Nishimura. Shima escaped with a cruiser and several destroyers that were pursued by U.S. aircraft during the following day.

Oldendorf had dispatched his cruisers in pursuit of Shima's force and to mop up any remaining cripples in the area when at 0728 he received a message from Admiral Kinkaid sending congratulations and well done to his force. Ten minutes later Oldendorf received a second message from Kinkaid telling him that the escort carriers east of Samar Island were under attack by the Japanese Central Force. With low fuel, few torpedoes and almost no ammunition remaining, Admiral Oldendorf set course for Leyte Gulf. Where was Halsey?

At 1018 October 25, Commander Nishino, commanding officer of the one Nishimura destroyer, *Shigure*, to escape Oldendorf, sent a radio message to CinC Combined Fleet, Admiral Toyoda, and to Admiral Kurita: "All ships except *Shigure* went down under gunfire and torpedo attack." This message had a significant impact on Kurita's action later in the morning.<sup>10</sup>



### The Battle Off Cape Engano

A decoy, that was our first primary mission, to act as a decoy. My fleet could not very well give direct protection to Kurita's force because we were very weak, so I tried to attack as many American carriers as possible, and to be the decoy or target for your attack. I tried to let Kurita's fleet have little attack from you. The main mission was all sacrifice. An attack with a very weak force of planes comes under the heading of sacrifice of planes and ships.<sup>11</sup>

This is the testimony Admiral Ozawa gave to U.S. interrogators while being interviewed after the war.

According to the original SHO-I plan the carriers were to steam into Leyte Gulf with Kurita's fleet. Ozawa knew, with only 120 aircraft on four carriers, that this plan had little chance of success. Rather than be destroyed without purpose, he proposed to Toyoda that his ships become a decoy, giving Kurita a better chance to reach Leyte. The pilots assigned to the carriers were so inadequately trained that when they launched from the carriers, rather than trying to return to the flight deck, they landed on Luzon. When Ozawa launched fifty-eight planes against TF 38 on the afternoon of 24 October they never encountered ships. They were engaged by U.S. combat air patrol and those not shot down landed at Clark Field near Manila. Ozawa's second launch did succeed in locating the TF 38.3 and sunk *Princeton*, before landing at Clark. These two strikes left Ozawa with twenty-three aircraft on 25 October. Had the reports of these actions reached Kurita he would have known the location of Halsey's carriers and that Ozawa's decoy tactics

were successful, but radio failure on Ozawa's flagship, *Zuikaku*, did not permit transmission of the signal. Another communication blunder between Japanese commanders that caused second and third order effects.

At 0815, just as Ozawa expected, 120 U.S. aircraft began attacking the Northern Force. The few remaining Japanese fighter planes were shot down and the carriers were completely at the mercy of Halsey's aircraft. At the same time Ozawa's force was being attacked, Kurita came upon the escort carrier force off Samar. Ozawa sent Kurita a message stating:

The enemy fleet has been lured north and is attacking our ships with its entire force.<sup>12</sup>

Again, Kurita did not receive this important message and later altered his plan based on lack of information.

U.S. planes continued attacking the Northern Force until mid-afternoon, sinking all four carriers. Ozawa was forcibly removed from the sinking *Zuikaku* by his Chief of Staff and proceeded to fight from a destroyer. The remnants of the force retired toward the Ryukyus under attack from carrier planes, a surface action group and eventually submarines.

While TF 38 was dishing out punishment on the Northern Force, the day was hardly uneventful in Halsey's flag plot on *New Jersey*. Halsey had rendezvoused three of the task groups at midnight on the night of 24-25 October, at that point turning tactical command over to Admiral Mitscher. Mitscher's experience took over and he launched the first strike against

Ozawa at 0530, sending scout planes ahead on the logically expected bearing of the enemy. The planes quickly found the Japanese force and commenced a series of day-long unopposed strikes that destroyed the major ships of the Northern Force. Mitscher used his planes efficiently, particularly without the threat of enemy aircraft and proceeded to systematically disable and sink the four Japanese carriers.

#### Where is Task Force 34 ?

When contact had been established with the Northern Force, Halsey directed Admiral Lee, Commander TF 34, to proceed toward the enemy at 20 knots. At the same time he radioed TG 38.1, 260 miles to the southeast refueling, to rejoin the other TF elements. About 0825 Halsey was handed a message from Seventh Fleet marked "Urgent". Kinkaid had sent a plain language message telling Halsey the Seventh Fleet ships were under attack by the Japanese Central Force off Samar. Eight minutes later Halsey received a second message telling him that TF 34 was desperately needed off Samar immediately. Kinkaid thought TF 34 was still positioned near San Bernardino Strait, when in fact it was 350 miles north of Leyte Gulf, steaming away from Kinkaid at 20 knots. The first order Halsey issued after receipt of Kinkaid's messages was to Admiral Lee telling him to continue to close the enemy at 25 knots. This was still the Northern Force, not Kurita's to the south. Halsey then

ordered Admiral McCain and TG 38.1 to proceed toward Leyte Gulf and launch strikes in support of Kinkaid at the earliest possible time. At the time McCain was closer to Halsey than Kinkaid and it would be more than two hours, even at maximum speed before he could launch aircraft that could reach Samar. Halsey responded to Kinkaid with the information that he had dispatched McCain to assist him as soon as possible. During this period at least nine "Urgent" messages were transmitted between the two commanders. Because of the volume of message traffic being sent, it took two hours for the priority messages to be transmitted and delivered. At this critical time, U.S. radio traffic was working only slightly better than that of the Japanese. Communications, always critical, are even more so during battle, yet today's navy continues to experience problems similar to those Halsey and Kinkaid experienced in 1944.

Halsey's staff could not believe the reports on Kurita's force. These had to be identification mistakes made under the stress of battle. Halsey sent a position report to Kinkaid, telling him he was engaged with the Northern Force and repeated his information about orders to TG 38.1. Meanwhile he continued to run north in pursuit of Ozawa.

At 1000 the classic message from Admiral Nimitz arrived:

The whole world wants to know where is Task Force 34 ?<sup>13</sup>

Nimitz, like Kinkaid, knew that Halsey's mission was to protect

the Leyte beachhead and thought that he had organized TF 34 to do just that. Half an ocean away the Fleet CinC wanted to know what Halsey had done with the fast battleships. For Halsey to break off pursuit and turn south would not solve Kinkaid's problem. It would take a twenty-four hour high speed run to reach Samar. To reverse course would mean not engaging the Northern Force that Halsey had been chasing for eighteen hours while attempting to force a surface engagement by his battle line. The messages for help from Kinkaid continued and finally at 1055, when the U.S. battleships were within forty-five miles of the Northern Force, Halsey gave the order to reverse course. It was three hours since Kinkaid's first message. Admiral Lee's battleships were running in column at twenty-five knots, into a headwind, an impressive sight to anyone who has spent time on the sea. They would be within main battery range of the Japanese in an hour. In one half hour the distinctive pagoda mast structures would be on the horizon. The disappointment of the "Gun Club" could not be measured. To have sixteen inch guns loaded and turrets trained at the enemy only to turn away just before pressing the firing key must have been devastating to the men of this unique group. But as ordered, at 1115 the battleships came about and headed south at twenty knots. Destroyers in company were refueled, taking two hours, and TG 34.5 was formed, commanded by Rear Admiral Badger, with orders to steam to San Bernardino Strait at 28 knots. TG 34.5 included two battleships, *Iowa* and *New Jersey*, three cruisers and eight

destroyers, a partial group of TG 34 as originally established.

TG 34.5 was to reach the San Bernardino by 0100 26 October, check the approaches and continue south to Leyte Gulf, destroying any Japanese ships encountered. This schedule was too late to catch Kurita. TG 34.5 located a single Japanese destroyer, *Nowaki*, a straggler from the Central Force, and promptly sunk it with gunfire. The detachment of TG 34.5 raises more questions about Halsey's decisions. Had he detached TF 34 upon receipt of Kinkaid's first message, without destroyers to refuel, Admiral Lee's six battleships would have arrived in the area early enough to engage Kurita. Lee, the most experienced battleship squadron commander in the Navy, would have had the opportunity to "cross Kurita's T", with evenly matched forces and may have produced the most spectacular dreadnought engagement of the war. As it was, the smaller TG 34.5 was overwhelmingly outgunned by Kurita's four battleships and an encounter would have probably been disastrous for the U.S. task group. Halsey must have still been after the Northern Force in his mind and heart, for luckily this operational error did not lead to an engagement.

Meanwhile to the north, Admiral Mitscher continued air and surface engagements with the remaining ships of the Northern Force, now moving toward the northwest. Ozawa continued engaging the U.S. ships commanded by Admiral Dubose and was not giving up without a fight. Ironically at 1930, the pursuer became the pursued as Ozawa with two battleships, a cruiser and

six destroyers turned to reengage Dubose, who had two battleships, several cruisers and destroyers. This might have been an interesting surface action but at 2130 Dubose turned south, leaving the Japanese to the U.S. submarines. The two surface forces did not miss each other by many sea miles although neither commander knew it. Failing to make contact, Ozawa retired to the north. The battle of Cape Engano had ended with Ozawa successfully completing his part of SHO-I, though sacrificial and costly, it was the only part of the plan that was successful during the entire battle.

It is not known why a sixteenth century Spaniard should have named as he did the obscure point of land from which this battle took its name. Engano is a Spanish word translated variously as "mistake, deception, lure, hoax, misunderstanding, misapprehension, misconception" - in about that order of preference.<sup>14</sup>

#### The Battle off Samar Island

Kurita's Central Force turned eastward about 1700 and steamed toward San Bernardino Strait fully expecting to fight their way into the Philippine Sea. Kurita had not received situation reports from the Northern or Southern Forces regarding their tactical situations. At 1800 he radioed I.G.H. that his fleet intended to enter Leyte Gulf at 1100 on 25 October without regard for any damage they might suffer.<sup>15</sup> At 2330 Kurita entered into the narrow straits in a single column formation, all ships darkened and at battle stations.

Unbelievably at 0035 when the force entered the Philippine Sea not a single enemy was found. This missed opportunity by Halsey's TF 34 would have placed Kurita in the same position as Nishimura would be in about two hours, exiting a narrow strait in column with an opposing battle line crossing the his "T". A stroke of luck for the Japanese and a serious tactical error for the U.S. fleet. Halsey's preoccupation with the Japanese carriers allowed Kurita access to the landing armada at Leyte with only a group of sixteen escort carriers (designated CVE), commanded by Rear Admiral T.L. Sprague, designated TG 77.4, in his path.

Task Group 77.4 was divided into three task units, designated TU 77.4.1,.2, and .3, called Taffy 1, 2, and 3, for the radio call signs of their unit commanders. The TU's were organized into Northern, Middle and Southern groups, commanded by Rear Admiral Clifton A. Sprague, Rear Admiral Felix B. Stump and Rear Admiral Thomas L. Sprague (no relation), respectively. On the morning of 25 October, the three groups were positioned on a north-south axis about 120 miles east of Leyte Island. The escort carriers, also called jeep carriers, were thin-skinned merchantmen augmented with flight decks. They had few guns, were slow and carried a small complement of aircraft used mostly for ground support operations. Most of the pilots had never attacked a surface ship or engaged enemy aircraft in aerial combat. After several days supporting the Leyte landings, the supply of torpedoes and bombs on the carriers was



almost depleted.<sup>14</sup>

During the 0000-0400 midwatch on 25 October the escort carriers were preparing for the dawn launch. Kinkaid had ordered a sector search to the north, covering bearings 340 to 040 degrees, by the first launch planes, but rain squalls during the night had hampered respotting the flight decks. At 0658 Taffy 3 aircraft were launched to search the northern quadrant. Taffy 1, the southernmost group, was launching planes to locate the remnants of Shima's group withdrawing through the Mindanao Sea. Taffy 2 was launching aircraft for ground support of the troops on Leyte.

The fifteen minute period between 0645 and 0700 brought surprise to both U.S. and Japanese commanders and sailors off the coast of Samar. At 0645 U.S. lookouts observed anti-aircraft fire to the northwest. They thought it was U.S. ships firing at friendly planes. At 0646 *Fanshaw Bay* reported an unidentified surface contact on her radar screen and radio operators in CIC heard what was reported as "Japs gabbing" on the interfighter direction net. Somebody must be joking! At 0647 a pilot from *Kadashan Bay* flew over what he reported as four Japanese battleships, eight cruisers and numerous destroyers, twenty miles north of Taffy 3 and attacked one of the cruisers with a glide bomb. Admiral Sprague thought the pilots were attacking TF 34 and ordered that identification of the ships as Japanese be confirmed. Identification was confirmed when lookouts reported the distinctive pagoda masts

on the horizon. At 0658 the Japanese battleships opened fire at 34,000 yards and colored splashes erupted around the CVEs of Taffy 3.

The Japanese were as surprised as the U.S. forces. Despite all the punishment, alterations and course changes, Kurita felt he had come upon the fast carrier task force of Halsey. He had not received Ozawa's message reporting the success of the decoy. Kurita was shifting from night steaming formation to the circular anti-aircraft defensive circular formation when the CVEs were located. Immediately he ordered a general attack which because of speed variations between the Japanese ships caused a wide dispersion of his forces. This dispersion worked to the advantage of the overmatched CVE's and against Kurita. Had Kurita formed his four battleships and six cruisers into a battle line to concentrate firepower he could have easily destroyed the CVEs and their escorts. The superior Japanese destroyers with long range torpedoes should have been similarly organized and directed to targets by the flagship. Instead each attacking Japanese combatant was conducting an individual action against an overmatched, outgunned enemy force. This tactical error by a commander of Kurita's experience was as serious a mistake as Halsey's withdrawal from San Bernardino. Planes in the air began attacks on the Japanese ships, often making decoy runs without bombs or ammunition to force the Japanese ships to maneuver radically. The destroyers of Taffy 3 headed straight for the Japanese fleet. Although outgunned they

spread smokescreens and commenced torpedo attacks that forced the Japanese to scatter even farther apart. Rear Admiral Sprague immediately sent out radio dispatches to Kinkaid and the other Taffy commanders advising them of his situation and calling for any offensive help that could be provided. Taffy 1 and 2 commanders launched all available aircraft to assist and Kinkaid began his series of messages to Halsey asking for help from TF 34.

During the battle in Surigao Strait Kinkaid's staff urged him to verify that Halsey had left supporting ships at San Bernardino, but Kinkaid refused, believing that the basic orders clearly defined each commanders area of responsibility.

At 0412, puzzled by Halsey's silence, Kinkaid sent a message informing Halsey about the action at Surigao, adding the words, "Is Task Force 34 guarding San Bernardino Strait?" The answer to this message was received at about 0700, the same time Admiral Sprague advised Kinkaid of the Japanese attack. The reply read: "Negative. Task Force 34 is with our carriers now engaging enemy carriers." Kinkaid could not believe this reply. He radioed Halsey again, "Request immediate air strike. Also request support by heavy ships. My old battleships low on ammunition." Simultaneously he radioed Oldendorf to prepare to battle the Japanese in Leyte Gulf. Halsey later said, "His messages surprised me, from a man of Tom Kinkaid's coolness and courage. It also irritated me. Here I was on the brink of a critical battle, and my kid brother was yelling for help around the corner."<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that Kinkaid's initial message was delayed in transit and was received after the second at 0922. The significance of the second message is important for Halsey, because he felt Oldendorf's battleships could handle the

"remnants" of the Central Force as they had destroyed the Southern Force during the night. How could Kinkaid have allowed their ammo to run low ?

Kinkaid's message received shortly thereafter really shocked Halsey. In plain English it read, "Where is Lee? Send Lee." Kinkaid purposely sent this message in the clear. He wanted to shock Halsey out of his mindset and also hoped to frighten the Japanese into believing that help was in the area and on the way. This transmission actually had the desired affect on Kurita, as he later admitted. It helped him to decide to break off the attack later in the morning, thinking a powerful surface force was coming to assist the ships he was engaging.<sup>10</sup>

The rapidly changing situation, weather, and number of ships in the battle created problems and indecision for the participants and commanders. Because the combatants were so spread out and maneuvering radically in the face of torpedo attacks, Admiral Kurita had possibly the worst picture of all. He had a message stating Nishimura's force had been destroyed, so he knew he would not receive any help if he reached Leyte Gulf; he did not know Ozawa had succeeded in fooling Halsey to the north; he had no aerial recon to advise him of the strength of the enemy force he was fighting; and his force was taking substantial punishment from Taffy 3 screening ships. The destroyers and destroyer escorts caused so much confusion by placing themselves between the Japanese ships and the CVEs that

Kurita lost the battle picture. At 0911 he ordered his ships to reform on a northerly course.

At this moment he held victory in his grasp. He had sunk the *Gambier Bay* and damaged several other CVEs, sunk three destroyers, and the U.S. aircraft were out of weapons. Because of force dispersion, communication between his ships was almost impossible, so he steamed north for two hours while consolidating his forces and deciding how to proceed. This decision saved the forces at Leyte Gulf. Kurita decided to give up the final Japanese attempt to reach Leyte. At 1300, after several course changes, including one toward the southwest and Leyte, he passed the spot where he had first sighted Taffy 3, while heading north toward San Bernardino Strait, away from his ultimate objective.

The aircraft from the CVE's and later in the day TG 38.1 continued attacking Kurita's force as they headed for San Bernardino. The last planes reported sighting four battleships, three cruisers, and seven destroyers on a northwesterly course at slow speed. Kurita had left behind three cruisers and several cripples while retiring. He had been eliminated as threat to Leyte Gulf and in that sense the Battle off Samar was considered a U.S. victory.

There have been numerous articles written about the heroic CVEs and their escorts at Leyte but not enough can be said about how they deceived and actually defeated such a superior enemy force. Expert maneuvering and shiphandling, sacrifice of

ships and the determination of American sailors and airmen saved the day for the transports still in Leyte Gulf and the soldiers on the beaches and inland within range of naval gunfire. Attempting to explain his escape from what was sure destruction, Admiral Sprague paid tribute to the self-sacrificing attacks of the destroyers and aircraft, but also added a note concerning "the definite partiality of Almighty God." As the Japanese forces turned away, a signalman aboard Sprague's flagship was heard to remark, "Oh Hell, they got away!" 17

1. Masanori Ito, The End of the Imperial Japanese Navy, p. 120.
2. Ibid.
3. Andrieu D'Albus, Death of a Navy, p. 313.
4. C. Vann Woodward, The Battle for Leyte Gulf, p. 41.
5. Ito, p.126.
6. Ibid., p. 129.
7. Woodward, p. 69.
8. Ibid., pp. 69-70.
9. Samuel E. Morison, History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XII, p. 202.
10. Ibid. p. 238.
11. Ito, p. 145.
12. Ibid., p. 149.
13. Gilbert Cant, "Bull's Run: Was Halsey Right at Leyte Gulf?", Life, XXIII (November 24, 1947), pp. 73-76.
14. Woodward, p. 133.
15. Rear Admiral Tomiji Koyanagi, With Kurita in the Battle for Leyte Gulf, "U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings", February 1953, Vol No. 79, No. 2, p. 124.
16. Woodward, p. 138-139.
17. Cant, p. 81.
18. Ibid.
19. Woodward, p. 159.

## CHAPTER V

### Final Results of the Battles

#### Conclusions

There is an old maxim: "Battle is a series of blunders and errors. The side which makes the least will win and the side which makes the most will lose."

After studying the Battle of Leyte Gulf while preparing this paper it can be said with a certain amount of confidence that the Japanese did not lose at Leyte Gulf because their strategy and tactics were wrong, or conversely, that the U.S. fleet won because their strategy and tactics were particularly strong. Analysis of the entire course of events for the battle clearly demonstrated that chance played a definite role in each segment of the action and in turn each segment influenced the whole battle. In any battle no one can tell when, where or how breaks will come but assuredly they will, and the breaks will make the winner at one moment a loser the next. Victory in the sea battles fought by the Japanese and American fleets from early morning on 23 October when Darter and Dace torpedoed Atago until Kurita withdrew through San Bernardino Strait late on 25 October, while surpassing all other sea battles ever fought in many respects, was still determined by a certain amount of luck. Breaks went to both sides but the U.S. took advantage of the ones that came their way.



As 25 October drew to a close, the situation involving the opposing fleets was radically different than it had been twenty-four hours earlier. Virtually all the action was over, except for submarines pursuing Ozawa, fleeing toward Japan with two carrier-battleships and other remnants of the fleet. Kurita was winding his way through the Mindoro Strait, having escaped with four battleships, four cruisers and four destroyers, from an original force of thirty-two ships. Nishimura was dead and his ships were sunk almost without a trace. Shima was heading for Brunei with part of his small force. In a one day period, Japan had been reduced from a great naval power to a battered group of ships that would never again be a factor in the war. From this day on, the primary weapon of the Japanese would be the Kamikaze Corps, which actually was instituted although with minimal effects, during the Leyte Gulf battle and continued to take American lives until the surrender in August 1945.

Admiral Mitscher and his two carrier groups were alone in an empty North Philippine Sea. Halsey was racing toward San Bernardino but would arrive too late to engage Kurita. Kinkaid's battered but proud escort carriers and support ships were recovering from their brush with death near Leyte.

Admiral Halsey sent the following message to Admiral Nimitz and the JCS on 25 October: "You can say with confidence and assurance the Japanese Navy has been beaten, routed and broken."<sup>1</sup> This message was part of the reason for Halsey's success. Beyond the immediate problem of the battle he could

see that the Japanese had adopted desperate tactics in their attempt to defeat the Americans at Leyte. With their weakened forces they could only try to achieve surprise in a three pronged attack. When that tactic failed and the surviving ships were limping back to Japanese waters, the Japanese Navy was no longer a viable fighting force. Halsey was quick to grasp and say that Leyte Gulf was the last gasp of a desperate nation and its Navy. From that moment on the American Navy could move anywhere in the Pacific without worry.

#### Japanese Mistakes and Effects

It has been said in many circles that the Japanese SHO-I plan had absolutely no chance of success from the beginning, however with a few exceptions, one obviously quite large, the plan was sound and if the ultimate objective is remembered, it came within an hour of succeeding.

The biggest drawback was that without aircraft to obtain air superiority for their forces in the close waters of the Philippine Islands, the plan started with Kurita and Nishimura having little chance of success. The Japanese land-based Air Forces on Luzon achieved practically nothing during the battle, whereas the SHO-I plan counted upon them to heavily damage U.S. aircraft carriers for the overall operation to succeed. The aircraft should have conducted all out attacks on the U.S. fleet to support the Japanese surface fleet. If they had done

any damage to the carriers and battleships Kurita and Nishimura may have had a chance at success. The Japanese I.G.H. knew well the limitations of the air force and also knew that the surface ships would bear the brunt of the battle. Had the formidable Japanese fleet concentrated forces as planned in SHO-1, rather than proceeding independently against a superior force, the outcome may well have been reversed.

Unity of command, or rather the lack of the same, dealt a major blow to the SHO-I plan. Nishimura and Shima combined would have been a much superior force together than separated without knowledge of each other's plans. If Shima had been the OTC for the Southern Force rather than the headstrong and resolute Nishimura perhaps a different battle plan would have been attempted, or he would have adjusted course and speed to meet Kurita's schedule. As the battle unfolded, had the Southern Force delayed until 1100 as Kurita planned, with Halsey's withdrawal to the north, the pincer movement from the Central and Southern Forces would have been an easy victory for the Japanese. Oldendorf's force was out-gunned and would have had to split forces to protect the landing forces and the CVEs.

The Japanese communications between forces and even between ships was appalling. There is no more important ability in operations at sea than being able to talk to your subordinates or commanders. The failure to transmit and receive not only critical, but also routine messages, played a significant role in the Japanese failure and aided U.S. success. Kurita never

knew until he was off Samar that Nishimura had been destroyed. Nishimura did not know that Kurita changed course and thus the changes in the overall timetable for the combined assault on Leyte so he plowed on alone into Oldendorf's battle line. Kurita thought the carriers off Samar were the fleet carriers because he did not get word from Ozawa that the ruse had drawn TF 38 north of Luzon. The inability of Japanese Air Forces on Luzon to inform Kurita that there was no air cover for his ships as he steamed through the waterways of the Philippines. In each instance mentioned, lack of communications caused commanders to make decisions based upon incomplete or without the information required to operationally conduct a battle.

Failure to know the enemy caused Kurita to break off his pursuit of the CVE's off Samar. Improper identification of the U.S. force led him to think he did not have the speed to overtake the carriers, when rather than thirty knots, the CVEs were only capable of eighteen knots. Additionally they each had only one five-inch deck gun, a small threat to Yamato's eighteen-inch radar controlled guns.

Japanese submarines had several days to attack the CVEs and support ships off Leyte and even the large carriers near Luzon, but as they had done since mid-1942, the Japanese submarines adopted a defensive posture. The period when U.S. ships converged around Leyte was ideal for submarine tactics, but the Japanese failed to capitalize on the situation.

Since the end of the war Japanese officers have stated

that Kurita should have been braver and gone on to Leyte. That may be true but he had his reasons, decided during the heat and fog of battle, and the results stand.

#### U.S. Mistakes and Effects

The Sixth Army operations report summarized its view of the probable consequences if the battle had gone against the U.S. Navy as follows:

Had the Japanese plan succeeded, the effect on the Allied troops on Leyte in all likelihood would have been calamitous, for these troops would have been isolated and their situation would have been precarious indeed. If it had been victorious in the naval battle, the Japanese fleet could have leisurely and effectively carried out the destruction of shipping, aircraft, and supplies that were so vital to Allied operations at Leyte. An enemy naval victory would have had an adverse effect of incalculable proportions not only upon the Leyte Operation, but upon the overall plan for liberation of the Philippines as well.<sup>2</sup>

Admiral Halsey did not have quite the same view of the situation:

That Kurita's force could have leisurely and effectively carried out the destruction of shipping, aircraft and supplies in Leyte Gulf was not in the realm of possibilities. . . . Kurita would have been limited to a hit-and-run attack in the restricted waters of Leyte Gulf. He would further have been subjected to the attack of the cruisers present in Leyte Gulf. He would have been limited to minor damage. . . . The statement that an enemy naval victory would have an effect of incalculable proportions not only on the Leyte operation, but upon the overall plan for the liberation of the Philippines as

well, can only be premised on the thought that our naval forces would be almost totally destroyed. The prognostication of such a condition could be reasoned on none of the facts existing during this three days' engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Admiral Halsey's view of the battle and its various phases was different from almost everyone else in the chain of command within the battle zone. Of the major tactical errors charged to U.S. forces, almost every one was a direct result of Halsey's decisions. While the two fleets experienced communication problems, they were the result of overloaded circuits rather than equipment deficiencies the Japanese suffered. The real discussion point is the decision to withdraw all the forces from the exit of San Bernardino Strait. Halsey put great stock in questionable damage reports and based major decisions on incomplete information. Admiral Spruance was in Pearl Harbor with Nimitz during the battle. When Halsey reported he was engaging the Northern Force with the carrier aircraft and TF 34, Spruance said, "I would have kept those big guns right there.", and pointed at the San Bernardino Strait on the chart. The obvious difference in styles and modus operandi of the two fleet commanders has always generated lively discussion at wardroom tables.

Halsey's obsession with destruction of the Japanese aircraft carriers, which he considered the "fleet" rather than the super battleships and heavy cruisers, jeopardized the entire Leyte operation. Only the gutsy fighting spirit of Sprague's Taffy groups and Kurita's decisions saved the

beachhead.

Admiral King could be faulted for permitting, in fact insisting upon, divided command, with Halsey retaining his independence of movement, while supporting MacArthur's navy, which was Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet. Admiral Nimitz erred for not making it clear to Halsey that he was responsible for protecting the amphibious assault force and for allowing Halsey to believe that he was a free agent if he got the chance to hit the Japanese heavy units. Halsey erred by not tracking Kurita closer when he reversed course in the Sibuyan Sea. He can also be faulted for being predictable. The Japanese set the bait, knowing Halsey would find the four aircraft carriers too much to pass up.

#### CLOSURE

Would a battle fought under similar circumstances today have the same results? The aircraft carrier and its associated battle group of support ships is just as important today as the fast carrier battle groups were in 1944. The United States Navy would not take a carrier into an area without air superiority. Long range missiles from surface ships and submarines give today's fleets the same problems land based aircraft gave Mitscher in World War II. Improved electronics would most certainly provide task force commanders with locating data on enemy forces and surveillance satellites track and report ship

movements. It is hard to imagine being surprised as Sprague was by Kurita, with today's detection systems. A sea battle near choke points similar to the Philippines is a distinct possibility in current battle plans. The U.S. would win again and with improved equipment we would probably not make the mistakes of divided command in a single theater. We have learned from Leyte Gulf. It was a battle not only of fleets, but also of personalities and that element cannot be factored into the overall equation.

Despite the interest this battle will continue to command, only limited operational and tactical conclusions can be drawn from the complicated and eventful fight. Although the opposing air forces were of disproportionate strength, the battle emphasized the importance of air superiority and the tactical advantage of the fast carrier task force. Early in the war Japan had demonstrated its value at Hawaii, at Leyte the U.S. task forces returned the favor. This was Japan's last desperate chance. They tried and failed despite heroic efforts by men and machines.

1. Edwin Hoyt, How They Won the War in the Pacific, p.453.
2. M. Hamlin Cannon, United States Army in World War II, Vol 5, p. 92.
3. Ibid.



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